

*Performing a Role: Learning, Interpreting, and Portraying Musetta in
Giacomo Puccini's La Bohème*

An Honors Thesis (HONR499)

by

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Abstract

Learning and performing a role in an opera poses many musical, physical, and psychological challenges. Puccini's opera, *La Bohème*, is the story of friends struggling to find their place in the world and developing relationships with each other. Characters in this opera are common people leading common lives. The stories of each character are written in the score, but the interpretation is left to the actor or actress playing the role. Learning how to portray a human being other than one's own self is a challenge not for the faint of heart. This thesis shows my personal process of developing and interpreting the character of Musetta.

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Music is perhaps one of the most beautiful art forms that exists. Music is used to share and elicit emotion from listeners. It is made to make people feel alive and important. It gives life a greater sense of worth because it allows people to access the inner workings of the human mind and intellect. Music has been changing lives for centuries and will continue to do so because it is a phenomenon that is untouchable. This is why I chose to base a creative project on music and in particular the subgenre, opera. Music in all forms is beautiful. However, music in the form of an opera has extra features such as text and acting. This collaboration of music, words, and visual emotion heightens the experience. These three components create an atmosphere that carries audience members into another realm on the verge of reality. Opera is a unique world of insanity and suspended disbelief.¹ It is this fine line between reality and insanity in opera that is so attractive. Performing in an opera requires the knowledge of one's own mentality and emotional limits. However, one must also be completely vulnerable in order to truly portray another human being based on 200 pages of music and lyrics. My first personal experience with learning and performing an entire role for a large operatic work was as Musetta in Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, under the direction of Dr. Jon Truitt, BSU Opera Theatre. After spending a year learning and preparing this role, I performed it once for a live audience on Friday, March 27 at 7:30 p.m. in Sursa Performance Hall at Ball State University. This performance was everything I ever thought it would be. The methodology of learning a role is the basis of my creative project and thesis.

Preparing a role in an opera is a complicated process. Characters in operas are typically dynamic and extremely complex. The world in which we live thrives on people. It thrives on life, on excitement, on motion, and on action. Opera thrives on this as well. However, there is something on which opera thrives that real life does not. Opera is nothing without imagination.

¹ Joseph Levitt, interview by author, 10 April 2015, Indianapolis, audio/video recording, Castleton, Indianapolis.

Performance halls are simply large rooms with a stage waiting to be transformed into another world. The real world is perceived by the senses of sight and hearing. However, audience members and performers need to employ other senses in order to accurately delve into the story of an opera. This is where imagination is necessary. Performers typically aim to transform a stage with minimal set decoration into a whole different time period and country. The performers must guide the audience members into this scene. However, this is merely the beginning.

When performing in an opera, performers need to understand the difference between a singer who can act and an actor who can sing. Typically in opera, vocal quality comes first because the music is what people come to hear. However, the music is also where the story lies. Singers need to be made aware of the potential dangers to the voice when acting on stage. Being too aggressive with emotions such as anger, sadness, excitement, and fear can cause harm and distress to the vocal folds.² Therefore, it is important to understand how to portray a character through the voice without harming the vocal folds, but on a large stage with no zoom lens or microphone as in film. I learned my vocal limits through weekly rehearsals and private practicing. I needed to recognize how far I could push myself without harming my vocal folds or going so deeply into the character that it began to affect my throat. Because *La Bohème* has such a sad ending, I needed to make sure that the emotions in each act did not affect my vocal production.

La Bohème is an Italian opera in four acts composed by Giacomo Puccini.³ The first performance was in Turin, Italy, at the Teatro Regio on February 1, 1896. The opera takes place in Paris around 1830. It tells the story of two men who live together. Rodolfo, a young poet, and

² Vocal folds are delicate muscles used to produce sound. If they are misused vocal polyps, nodules, or cysts may form.

³ Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, (Milan, Italy: Ricordi, 2008).

Marcello, a painter, are poor, starving artists. Act I begins with these two spending Christmas Eve together. Their two friends, Schaunard and Colline, join them for an impromptu evening of gallivanting around the room and improvising a party. Suddenly the landlord arrives unexpectedly and inquires about rent payment. After the four men convince the landlord to leave without the rent, Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard go to Café Momus. Rodolfo chooses to stay home to finish writing an article. There is a knock on the door from his neighbor, Mimì, who lost her key. They search together and discover their mutual attraction for one another. Then, they head to the café to join Rodolfo's friends.

Act II takes place at Café Momus. This is the first scene Musetta enters—and perhaps her most infamous. Marcello, Musetta's former lover, sees her and is startled. He is outraged as he watches Musetta enter with her new, elderly companion, Alcindoro. After frivolity ensues, Musetta rids herself of Alcindoro and leaves with Marcello and his friends. Act III begins on a cold February morning. Marcello and Mimì discuss her relationship with Rodolfo and her worsening illness. Rodolfo knows Mimì is dying, but they decide to stay together until spring. As the two lovers unite, Marcello and Musetta aggressively argue about her flirtatious and faithless actions. Then, in Act IV, Musetta finds a dying Mimì and brings her to Marcello and Rodolfo's loft. Schaunard, Colline, Marcello, Musetta, and Rodolfo comfort Mimì as she leaves the physical world in the presence of her closest friends.

When contemplating how to understand acting in the form of opera, I wondered about the difference between *becoming* a role and *portraying* a role. Should one try and understand every underlying motivation of a character's actions? Is it necessary to create a story beyond that written in the pages of the score? Or does this change the composer's intentions? In order to answer some of these questions, I interviewed a previous stage director of Ball State Opera

Theatre. Professor Joseph Levitt taught voice and directed opera at Ball State from 2004-2014. Levitt has very intimate and extensive experience with *La Bohème*. He toured with New York City Opera performing the leading role of Rodolfo. In his interview, Levitt explained his process for undertaking a role as a performer and as a director.⁴

Levitt says that to portray means to act, whereas to become means to change into something else. He feels that when performing a role, one needs a touch of each. However, internalization of a character depends on the person taking on a role and how much they need to grasp onto the character on an emotional level. “Internalization is as important as you need it to be,” Levitt says, adding that “Some people really need to immerse themselves.” As a performer, he keeps the character’s emotions separate from his own. He purely acts as a character instead of delving into the character’s feelings because this can definitely affect people’s daily lives if they let it. Personally, I found that I focused too much on trying to *be* Musetta. Instead of showing others who she is, I wanted to turn myself into her. This was challenging for me because I am nothing like Musetta. Therefore, halfway through the production I had to completely reevaluate my approach to characterization. Once I stopped trying to completely *become* Musetta and I began to *act* like Musetta, the whole process became significantly simpler and more exciting.

The next challenge I found in performing a role for an opera is the combination of acting and singing. As mentioned earlier, opera performers are typically singers who also act. However, with the recent development of modern technology and live screenings of operas, there has been a shift to actors who can also sing. Levitt says that the physicality of the character is separate from the musicality of the character. He chooses to get the role in his throat first. He learns the notes, learns the words, and learns the emotion and then, once it is purely muscle memory, he adds in the physicality of the character so long as it does not affect his quality of

⁴ Joseph Levitt, interview by author, 10 April 2015.

singing. This is much different than stage actors because they can let their throat swell up if they are about to cry. They can scream if they are to be scared. However, as a singer who often must sing for three hours in a performance, letting the emotion of the work get in the way of proper vocal production can be extremely hazardous and damaging. Levitt reiterates that singers are limited as to how much they can characterize the voice.

In the very beginning of the fall semester when I learned that I was cast in the role of Musetta, I began to look into past singers who had taken on this role or performed excerpts from the opera. Among them are prima donnas Renata Scotto,⁵ Kiri Te Kanawa,⁶ and Lucia Popp.⁷ Scotto and Te Kanawa are two sopranos with full, rich, and lyric voices. They have the capability to sing loudly and compete with a large orchestra. Voices like Popp's that are lighter, brighter, and more agile retain the capability to cut *through* the orchestra. This means that rather than a singer producing sound *louder* than an orchestra, the voice's overtones are heard separately from the orchestra's overtones. The distinction between voice types is called *fach*.⁸ I identified most with Lucia Popp because her voice is similar to mine. We are both coloratura sopranos,⁹ which means we can move the voice faster and have a higher range than more lyric voices.¹⁰ This is good for Musetta because she has passages in Act III that require swift movement of the voice over a large range (Figure 1).

⁵ Renata Scotto, *La Bohème*, Spotify, audio recording, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6qxNTel68eFgaGmuGjAFpF> [accessed December 1, 2014].

⁶ Kiri Te Kanawa, *Favorite Puccini Arias by the World's Favorite Sopranos*, 1986, Spotify, audio recording, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4I4xNhkWWuYcgB6RUKjswC> [accessed August 27, 2015].

⁷ Lucia Popp, *Quando m'en vo*, 1979, YouTube, audio and visual recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMmRetJMfOk> [accessed September 1, 2014].

⁸ *Fach*: a German word meaning compartment or division. It is used to determine vocal categories based on a singer's natural inclination and ability for agility, range, tessitura, and legato.

⁹ Coloratura: from the German word "Koloratur," meaning "elaborate ornamentation." This term refers to the ability to sing quick runs, leaps, and flourishes.

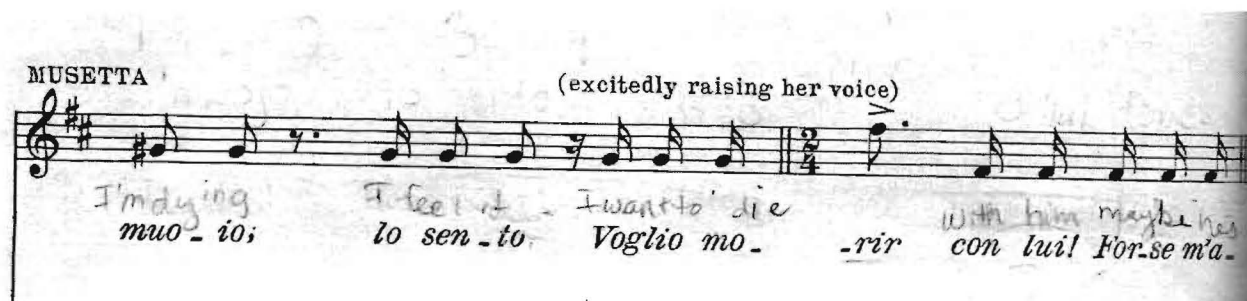
¹⁰ "Lyric" refers to medium-sized voices, typically with a warm color and the ability to sing long fluid lines.



Source: Puccini 2008, 225

Figure 1. Musetta sings to Marcello in Act III

I chose to investigate further and listen to as many musical interpretations of Musetta as possible in order to learn different ways to perform this role. In doing this, I learned that Puccini leaves room for personal interpretation, but there are definitely musical traditions that are expected of Musetta. In summary, one must elicit emotion from every note and every rest. It is not solely important to emote while singing, but one must understand the musical aspects that create this emotion, for example, why the rests are placed in the music at exact moments. For example, in act IV when Musetta is singing about Mimì, she has a series of sixteenth notes with very short rests added in the middle of the sentences (Figure 2). These rests symbolize breathlessness and desperation. If a singer does not fully understand why he or she is taking a breath, then the preparation of the work is not done.



Source: Puccini 2008, 258

Figure 2. Musetta explains how she found Mimì.

My next step was to begin translating the text word-for-word. This was less tedious than expected because I had already found a verbatim translation.¹¹ However, because *La Bohème* is in Italian, the goal was to make sense of the non-English word order I found with the word for word translation. I also discovered that words in different languages typically can be translated, but the specific emotion is sometimes lost in translation. The Italian language is fluid and rolls off the tongue. Italians are full of emotion and zest, which is directly translated into how they speak their language. My father is from Rome, Italy, thus from a young age I remember hearing him speaking Italian. Therefore, I have a natural inclination towards the beauty of the Italian language. Learning the English translation eliminated some of the inherent beauty of the Italian language for me. This made me appreciate Puccini's natural language more because colloquialisms like, "Non farmi il Barbablù!" are not understood as well from their English translation.¹² This translates to, "Don't play the Bluebeard!" This phrase meant nothing to me and I had to just trust that the subtext I added to the phrase would suffice. I simply thought about being silly and teasing with a hint of light chastisement. It was this method that aided in working around the language barrier.

Following the translation, I first learned Musetta's famous aria, "Quando m'en vo." My private voice teacher, Dr. Jon Truitt, who is also the opera director, advised me to learn this aria and the prayer at the end of Act IV first. He said that the aria would be musically challenging but that the prayer would be more emotionally challenging. When learning the aria, I first listened to every recording I could find. I learned it musically first because I was already familiar with the melody. I wish that I had never heard it before I was assigned the role because I would

¹¹ Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, trans. Nico Castel (Geneseo: New York, c1993-c1994), 54-147.

¹² Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, trans. Nico Castel, 72.

have approached it differently. If it had been brand new to my ears and eyes, I would have learned the text translation simultaneously with the music. This would have allowed me to work characterization into it from the beginning instead of needing to add it in after the fact. However, because I already knew the music, I had to work extremely diligently to make sure I knew what I was saying at every moment instead of simply singing a beautiful melody. It took me longer to interpret the Italian text in the aria simply because I was now learning the correct words instead of the ones I had mildly made up from singing along with a recording over the years.

“Quando m’en vo,” also known as Musetta’s Waltz, is a beautifully expressive portrayal of the superficial aspects of Musetta’s character. She is a courtesan who has a complicated relationship with her former lover, Marcello. During Act II, when she sees him at a café for the first time in a long while, she is with another man, Alcindoro. Within this scene, Musetta goes from playful to taunting, and then she rushes right back into Marcello’s arms. She is clearly using Alcindoro for money and status. In Act II, the character of Musetta is complicated because, on the surface, it seems like she is just amusing herself with everyone. Yet, in the rest of the opera her complexity becomes clear. She has a reason for everything she does. In order to accurately portray her dynamic character, it is necessary to read between the lines and infer more emotion than that shown in the text.

When interacting with Alcindoro, Musetta is either one hundred percent involved or she is flippant and annoyed. I interpreted her behavior towards him to be directly related to Marcello. When Musetta is rude to Alcindoro, it is after she has decided to return to Marcello. When she is flirtatious with Alcindoro, it is when she first arrives and wants to make Marcello squirm. From the outside, this shows Musetta as a manipulative woman. However, it is clear later in the opera that even though she and Marcello have an explosive relationship, there are deep-rooted feelings

between them. Therefore, when flirting with Alcindoro or any other man, as I performed this role, I chose to constantly look back to Marcello to make sure he was watching my every move. This helped me give purpose to Musetta's flirtatious and outright inappropriate behavior.

The next big characterization challenge is in act III when Musetta and Marcello have an intense fight. The words spoken to each other are extremely harsh and abusive. Marcello calls her a vain, frivolous flirt and says he will give her a severe thrashing.¹³ Meanwhile, Musetta says that she is free to make love with whom she pleases and she hates lovers who act like they are married. This act posed challenges for me because I personally disagree with a lot of Musetta's behaviors. However, when I reminded myself that I was just playing a part, I could put myself into her situation and be a better actress. In this scene, the two lovers scream at each other and break up yet again, but it is clear that they kind of enjoy this intense tension. Therefore, it was imperative to show the extent of their complicated relationship.

In the final act, Musetta is shown in a completely different light. She is concerned for her friend, Mimi. I chose to interpret Musetta's behavior in this act in an extremely solemn manner compared to someone who is absolutely physically distraught and vocally expressive. Before the opera, I had never experienced the death of a close friend. I thought that maybe Musetta would have a quiet reaction to Mimi's death because she is in shock. I imagined that seeing my best friend completely torn apart by disease would be tragic and I would be exceptionally upset, but I have never seen it five feet in front of my face. Musetta is young because many people died early in life in this time period. Medical care was much less aggressive and advanced compared to today. Therefore, Musetta has probably already seen someone die. Musetta could merely be used to death and has accepted it as it comes. As she stands next to Marcello and watches Mimi and Rodolfo reminisce, perhaps Musetta is more at peace about this death than angry. Now

¹³ Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, 222.

Mimi will not suffer any longer. Rodolfo cries out for Mimi, but Musetta stands there watching her. Musetta could have been sad and crying, but I chose to portray her as accepting of this death because Mimi's illness had been building up for a long time. This is the one time in the opera where Musetta does not loudly express her feelings, which makes it particularly special.

Act IV shows the depth of Musetta's character. If I had to guide a student in learning the role of Musetta, I would suggest learning it beginning with the fourth act. In this manner you learn about her humane side first, which allows her sexy and angry characteristics to make more sense. If you see just how kind she can be and how naïve she is in the large scheme of life, it allows the more exciting parts of her character to really shine. These parts of her act as a façade. In act IV, we see why Marcello would stay with her and keep coming back to her. In rehearsals for *La Bohème*, Dr. Truitt would say that this is Musetta without her makeup on. Here she shows the deepest part of herself to the people closest to her. She is vulnerable and has a sense of innocence in this act, despite her behavior in the earlier parts of the opera.

Originally, I did not expect Musetta's character to be this dynamic. I already knew her as a sexual being through the aria, "Quando m'en vo" when taken completely out of context from the opera. However, after putting the entire role together, I saw how lovely she is. She is complex and exciting. She is full of life and even in the face of death, she tries to lighten the mood by suggesting to Rodolfo that everything is going to be okay.¹⁴ Musetta is beautiful, excitable, fiery, impatient, caring, and loving. I would love the chance to portray this role again and to relearn Musetta's music and texts. I am sure that as I age and go through life, I will portray Musetta differently every time because I will grow to understand her more as I understand the world which surrounds me.

¹⁴ Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*, libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, 281.

I learned so much when participating in *La Boheme* as Musetta. Her character taught me how to be more present in a crowd. I know that Musetta is a fictional character and that acting on stage is merely make-believe. It is pure imagination. However, I feel that I took a little piece of Musetta out of the score and into my life—and I think this is completely acceptable.

Composers write grand operas with exquisite characters. The characters from Puccini's era were relatable to the common human being. He often wrote about the differences between classes.

Therefore, his characters are accessible and are filled with very genuine emotional tribulations.

Musetta is a fun-loving yet caring character. While I know I will play her differently if I get the chance, I will never forget my first attempt of learning the depths of her mind. Instinct tells me that this fictional being should not have such a heavy influence on my very real soul. However, can I call myself an artist if I do not experiment with the boundaries of reality at times?

Throughout this project, I learned a great deal about myself, about music, about art, and about humankind.

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